



CONGRESSMAN JOHN W. OLVER
Serving Western & Central Massachusetts

Veterans' Issues Newsletter

S U M M E R 2 0 0 3

Veterans' Budget Outlook

Earlier this year, in order to make room for the President's large tax cut, the Republican majority in the House of Representatives proposed a budget plan that would have cut veterans' benefits and services baseline funding over the next decade by close to \$30 billion. In response, I voted for a Democratic budget alternative with a smaller, low- to middle-income targeted tax cut that did not include these large veterans' program reductions. Although the Democratic plan failed in the House, negotiators from the House and Senate eventually reversed the House cuts in the final, compromise version of the long-term budget outline. In the end, Congress set aside \$64 billion for veterans' benefits and services in fiscal year 2004, an increase of nearly \$3 billion above 2003.

However, the Bush administration is still proposing increased co-payments and an annual enrollment fee in some cases as high as \$250 in order to cut costs for Veterans Affairs (VA) health care. I oppose what I see as a relatively low prioritization of the needs of veterans by this administration, and as the congressional budget process continues, I will work within the Appropriations Committee to continue to advocate for the level of support that veterans and their family members need and deserve.



I regularly present military service awards to First District residents (see page 3), like this veteran who deserved belated recognition from our nation.

MASSACHUSETTS

Improving Military Retirees' Health Care

All former service members should have access to quality medical care, but this has proven difficult for some. In order to provide veterans with more options, I am cosponsoring H.R. 58, the Keep Our Promise to America's Military Act. H.R. 58 would give retirees who served at least 20 years of active duty in the U.S. military access to lifetime health care under the Federal Employees Healthcare Benefits Program (FEHBP). The FEHBP provides benefits to 9 million federal employees and contracts with over 240 carriers, giving beneficiaries the widest selection of health plans in the country.

Benefits for Veterans' Spouses

The Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) provides compensation to help survivors of military retirees. When the program was enacted in the 1970s, the federal government mandated that surviving spouses would receive 55 percent of retired pay. However, current law reduces this amount to 35 percent when a spouse reaches 62 years of age. In an effort to correct this unfair provision that disproportionately affects older military widows, I am cosponsoring H.R. 548. This bill would carry out the original intent of the SBP program by phasing in increases in the age-62 annuity from 35 percent to 55 percent over five years.

\$7.4 Million for Veterans' Cemetery in Winchendon

Earlier this year, the VA awarded a \$7.4 million grant to fund the Establishment of the Massachusetts Veterans' Memorial Cemetery in Winchendon. This grant will fund the development of approximately 25 acres of land in the town for the site. As a member of the House Appropriations Committee, I have advocated for increases in the State Veterans' Cemetery account, changes in the construction rules to allow full federal funding for the construction of state cemeteries, and priority consideration for the Winchendon project. The new cemetery is scheduled to open in late 2004.

My experienced staff can help with questions or problems you encounter with federal agencies. While I cannot order an agency to decide a matter in your favor, my offices can usually get thorough consideration of requests and a timely response. Caseworkers in my offices are trained to assist you in the following areas:

Service-Connected Disability Compensation

Many veterans who apply for service-connected disability compensation, or an increased disability rating, report that the wait for a decision from the VA and the red tape involved can be excessive. My offices can encourage a timely decision and help you track the progress of your application.

If it is a matter of providing additional required information or documentation so that your case can proceed, my staff may be able to assist in moving the process along.

Lost Medals, Ribbons and Other Awards

Through the years, important mementos of military service are sometimes lost or misplaced. In some cases, medals, ribbons or other awards were never even properly or officially issued. Many veterans who take on the task of getting a replacement (or belated issuance) of service awards wait long periods of time for a response, or may never even get one. My offices can help get action from the various

service branches and issuing authorities.

Such inquiries require a letter written to me from the veteran (or next of kin of a deceased veteran) requesting the award(s) along with any pertinent documentation, especially the DD214 or other separation documents that list the appropriate award(s).

Lost Personnel Documentation

The most important record from one's military service is the DD214. While this is an essential document for veterans wishing to apply for VA benefits, it is often lost or misplaced. I can submit an inquiry to the National Personnel Records Center in St. Louis, MO to search the records and provide you with a replacement copy of your DD214.

If for some reason the record cannot be found (a fire in 1973 destroyed millions of military records), then an alternative official separation document can be issued that fulfills all the purposes of the regular DD214.

Other pertinent military records, such as hospital records, can be obtained in a similar manner.

VA Medical Care

If you feel that you or a family member has been given inadequate service or you have a complaint about treatment at a VA clinic or medical center, my staff will look into the matter for you and try to resolve any problems that persist. My offices can also provide you with information on the Gulf War Syndrome program.

Other Veterans' Benefits

My offices can provide you with eligibility and application information on other important programs for veterans, like:

- ▲ Military service and veterans' educational benefits
- ▲ VA home loan guarantees
- ▲ Dependency and indemnity compensation program for veterans' dependents
- ▲ Burial benefits and headstones/markers
- ▲ Flags flown over the U.S. Capitol for special occasions



Concurrent Receipt Expansion

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An important issue that Congress must resolve is concurrent receipt. In the past, veterans with service-connected disabilities were not able to receive simultaneous payment of their VA disability benefits and their retirement pay. Instead, disabled veterans received (and continue to receive) only a portion of their retired pay. On December 2, 2002, President Bush signed a bill that grants full concurrent receipt in five years for military retirees who received a purple heart or suffered combat injuries that are rated at 60% or higher. This 60% definition is difficult for the VA to apply fairly, and I believe it is an inadequate attempt to address a critically important issue. I, along with nearly 300 of my House colleagues, am a cosponsor of H.R. 303, which would immediately grant concurrent receipt for many more disabled veterans than are eligible under the 60% rule.

Visit me on the web: www.house.gov/olver

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